

March 4, 2009

The Honorable Barack Obama
President of the United States
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20500

Dear President Barack Obama:

At a White House gathering this week you spoke about your helicopter, Marine One, as a new experience. I'm sure you're also learning to appreciate Air Force One and have already become very familiar with all the benefits of personal (or what some call 'general,' 'private,' or 'business') aviation during the campaign. The President of the United States is literally the most important consumer of personal aviation in the world, and the nation's private air transportation system supports your activities with fuel, facilities, equipment, maintenance, training and the highest level of professional service at hundreds of airports around the country every year. In addition, the taxpayers spend over a million dollars per flight hour to give you and your family a level of personal aviation that no one else in the world is privileged to experience.

Personal aviation is something very special – but the industry that makes this all possible is under attack and may soon face economic collapse. Tens of thousands of jobs have already been shed and the industry is in a tailspin. What threatens these world-class American businesses most of all, you ask? The statements and actions produced by the Administration and Congress since you were elected have been, I believe, unintentionally catastrophic.

It was heartwarming to see you pay tribute to Chesley Sullenberger during your address to Congress this week. President Reagan paid a similar tribute in his first State of the Union address to Lenny Skutnik, a heroic citizen who rescued passengers when an Air Florida plane crashed into the Potomac in 1982. It seems that presidents appreciate the heroism of citizens who try to save victims of plane crashes. It's now time for a different kind of heroism to save aviation itself – and it won't require anyone to walk on water. All that is needed is an understanding in Washington that it's not fair for private aviation to become a political punching bag in some perverse populist version of class warfare in the skies. It's time for you to be the hero.

That's not to say that private aviation is perfect. Three auto executives in November misused their planes, but so have presidents. President Bush surely regrets sitting comfortably in Air Force One in the skies over New Orleans, while thousands suffered in the wake of Hurricane Katrina, and

President Clinton must regret getting a haircut in Air Force One on the ramp at LAX while ordinary airline passengers had to wait. But just as 99% of presidential air travel is justified, even essential, so too is the overwhelming majority of private aircraft use.

Of course, broad international economic forces have depressed aviation, like all businesses, but private aviation has been singled out in recent months as something unworthy by our nation's political leaders, as though the 1.3 million men and women in our industry are somehow expendable. Congressmen have ridiculed businessmen for merely owning a plane and passed laws prohibiting private air travel in companies receiving bail-out funds -- without even allowing the affected firms to prove that their use of a private plane is just as essential to them as it is to you. Despite these attacks, personal aviation is a critical tool for many businesses even when times are tough and profits are scarce, especially if their competitors are hunkered down and clueless about new opportunities.

But my message is not that your use of Air Force One (or Marine One) is inappropriate. Not at all! It is a great value to the taxpayers. Even at a million dollars per flight hour, given the time pressures on our nation's chief executive and the responsibility you have around the world (not to mention the importance of getting home at the end of the day to see your family), it is obviously cost effective. Personal aviation brings your enthusiasm to every corner of our nation and allows you to arrive refreshed for summit meetings around the world, anytime, anywhere.

Rather, I want to point out -- as I hope someday you will proudly admit -- that thousands of business leaders across America are just as justified to use private aviation as you, even if *their* companies have only a tiny fraction as much red ink on their balance sheet as *your* federal government has on its. And it's not just business leaders: presidents, CEOs, and leaders of universities, foundations, associations, unions, hospitals, law firms and individuals as diverse as Tiger Woods, John Travolta, and Yo-Yo Ma all depend on personal aviation as much as you do.

It's time to stop the populist demonizing. It's time, instead, to support, if only with words, an outstanding American success story. Compare our industry and products with all other transportation modes. We once had five other world-beating transportation sectors: Our maritime, railroad, mass transit, car, and truck industries were the finest and largest in the world. Now all these have declined and millions have lost their jobs. Only in personal aviation are we still number one in the world. Only in personal aviation do we dominate markets around the globe. Only in personal aviation were 21st-century employment levels at all-time highs. And only personal aviation has become a pariah in Washington. Why?

Some people say it's just politics. Three tin-ear auto executives perhaps needed to be criticized, but why shoot every personal airplane out of the sky? Others say it's envy and a new form of class warfare. Don't they understand that not everyone has the same transportation requirements? Buses may be fine for some people to get to work, and bicycles, subways, and taxis for others, but millions of us need personal automobiles to be effective. It's the same with aviation. The airlines don't meet the needs of thousands and thousands of businessmen and women. They need more flexibility, more speed, more security, more availability, better schedules, and more control. Just as the President of the United States does!

But it was the President of the United States who denigrated personal aviation in his address to Congress this week, as so many politicians have been doing lately. No one wants, as you said in your speech, "CEOs to use taxpayer money to ... disappear on a private jet," but is anyone really doing that -- disappearing? What if the CEOs, when they get on that jet, are actually increasing sales, making investments, evaluating major projects, delivering speeches, building morale, motivating their troops, making new loans, expanding plants, exploring new markets, finding new resources, beating competitors, attracting investors, and saving their company? Are they allowed to do that -- because most of the time that's what they're doing!

They're not "disappearing," they're trying to be as active as possible, doing as much with their 24-hours-a-day as you try to do with yours. They think it's wrong to just hunker down like a cowering groundhog. They want to soar, seize the day, and build their businesses. Isn't that exactly what we need to get out of a recession? In fact, we need more personal and business aviation activity now than ever before -- it's the get-the-job-done tool that's vital for American business.

The fact of the matter is that since mid-November, when our industry was famously a victim of a drive-by shooting by three auto executives and a hostile Congressional committee, personal aviation activity in America has fallen by more than a third. Corporations are being forced to sell their airplanes and aircraft resale prices have fallen to the lowest levels in history. Billions of dollars of aircraft values have disappeared and employment has been slashed at virtually every aviation business in the country.

But we know that you will continue to use personal aviation. We know that you depend on it to do your job. Why then is our government denigrating the thousands of others in all walks of life who simply want to do the same? You're not the only president in America who needs to fly.

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So what can you do? First, make promotion of aviation a reality within the federal government, just as we promote all other transportation modes. The FAA used to do it, but no more. Tell them jobs are at stake, because they are.

Second, create a program to foster our nation's world-leading businesses, like personal aviation. These are exactly the business sectors that need government as a partner, not an enemy. Explore ways that government can grow these businesses and expand exports.

Third, integrate private aviation into our total transportation system more fully. We're losing airports and making it harder to operate aircraft. Aviation's most important century is at hand, and yet we ignore it. The FAA is dysfunctional and desperately needs new leadership and a spirit of innovation.

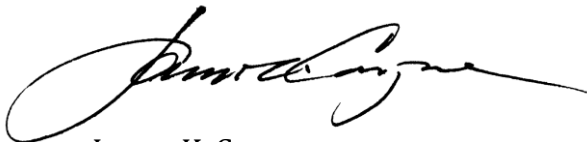
Finally, encourage all Americans to be as active as you are. A dramatic increase in all forms of activity – economic and physical, as well as political -- is the only thing that will end the recession.

It is interesting to note that 100 years ago, this year, the Wright brothers sold their first airplane, to the U.S. Signal Corps. Called the *Wright 1909 Flyer*, it was truly the first personal aircraft. Ever since, the government has supported personal aviation – until now. Hopefully, this is a brief exception, when political rhetoric fell from its normally lofty heights and was used hurtfully, perhaps innocently, in ways that has severely harmed this proud, American industry.

But personal aviation isn't asking for a bailout or a line item in the budget. We only want our government's leaders, who use personal aviation more than anyone, to acknowledge our value and include us in their vision of a new America.

If you can find the time, I'd be honored to discuss this with you more personally.

Respectfully,



James K. Coyne
President
National Air Transportation Association